

Dinu Lipatti - *Sonatina for the left hand*

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Abstract: *This article is dedicated to the study of one of most successful works of Dinu Lipatti, Sonatina for the left hand. In this work, the composer experiments how to obtain a varied and colourful discourse with few means, „in an uncomplicated and clearly organized framework” that „will always be accessible to the public”, as the composer himself says. Sensitivity and diligence transpire in the writing of this brilliant piece of „pure” Romanian folk inspiration. There are three ingeniously constructed parts, with main and secondary themes that mingle in upward and downward musical lines. In our opinion, Sonatina for the left hand belongs to the category of great value works „composed by a number of eminent composers-pianists”. Lipatti demonstrates in this work a noble sensitivity accompanied by a profound knowledge of the compositional craft and expressive resources of the piano.*

Keywords: *Dinu Lipatti, sonatina, piano, left hand, composer*

1. Introduction

Dinu (Constantin) Lipatti, the brilliant pianist and composer, was born on 19 March 1917 in Bucharest into a musical family. His father had studied violin with Sarasate and Carl Flesch, his mother was a good pianist and he was baptized by the great George Enescu who, with his huge personality, was going to influence his future career.

Moreover, as Mihail Jora noted in 1939 - „there is a spiritual and artistic closeness between these two musicians, despite the age that separates them as well as the lack of permanent contact between them.” (Jora 1968, 225).

„At the age of 11 years he becomes a student of the Conservatory in Bucharest where he studies with Florica Musicescu (piano) and Mihail Jora (counterpoint, harmony, composition), then enhancing his knowledge at École Normale de Musique in Paris (1934-1939), with Alfred Cortot and Yvonne Lefébure (piano), Paul Dukas and Nadia Boulanger (composition)...” (Larousse 2000, 278).

Throughout his meteoric life - „we cannot avoid flinching at the thought that a cruel fate stopped Lipatti’s life at the age of only 33 years.”— (Paladi 2012, 63) – he does not cease composing, standing as a candidate to „George Enescu” Composition Award which he actually gained in 1934 (being previously awarded

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the 1st mention in 1932 and II-nd prize in 1933), to be awarded the Silver Medal of the French Republic (for his merits as a composer) in 1937.

As a composer, Dinu Lipatti, of whom Paul Dukas thought that „he will be a second Enescu” (Tănăsescu 1965, 9) naturally gave a large space to the piano. Among his works dedicated to this instrument, we mention: Piano Sonata; Concertino in classical style for piano and chamber orchestra op.3; Three dances for two pianos; Nocturne for piano; Concert symphony for two pianos and string orchestra, op.5; Suite for two pianos; Nocturne in F sharp minor; Two dances in Romanian folk style for two pianos and Sonatina for the left hand.

2. Piano Sonatina op. 10, for the left hand

At the initiative of Constantin Silvestri „an event to which Lipatti will dedicate not only a part of his soul but also diligence, will be the writing of a *Sonatina for the left hand* which he will dedicate to the celebration of Mihail Jora’s 50 years of life and George Enescu’s 60” (Păsculescu-Florian 1986, 129). Composed in august 1941 at Fundăteanca (*The House at Fundateanca* being a superb villa built in neoRomanian style by Dinu Lipatti’s father, the violinist Constantin Lipatti, between 1938-1942), Sonatina for the left hand is a page inspired from „*pure Romanian theme and quite brilliant*” (Tănăsescu, Bărgăuanu 1971, 171), as the author himself mentions in his notes.

„Although according to some testimonies, he would have liked to compose a work for solo violin, he still opted in the end for the piano, experimenting how to obtain a varied and colourful discourse with few means. Thus one of the most successful of Lipatti’s works was born, often interpreted by generations of pianists” (Grigorescu 2011, 56). Here Lipatti capitalizes once more the national folklore in a work of conventional proportions in which relate harmoniously the elevated skill of form with the young brilliance of dance and nostalgia of the ancestral longing song.

The three parts of the Sonatina are introduced in the well known structures of the genre: Allegro in a sonata form, Andante espressivo in the form of a tripartite lied and the Final – Allegro, a spiritual rondo flowing in the sonata bed.

3. Analysis of Piano sonatina op. 10, for the left hand [8 Lipatti, 1953, 1-11]

3.1. Part I - *Allegro*

The first part opens in a note of anxiety through the sinuous line of a folk modal scale which has its center on the A sound. The series of the melodic model is built from semitones and enlarged seconds, a succession not in the least thought at random. We will notice this in the ways of processing the 4 sub-motifs (Figure 1, Figure 2).



Fig. 1. Dinu Lipatti – *Piano Sonatina, p. I, measures 1-2*

Fig. 2. Dinu Lipatti – *Piano Sonatina, p. I, measures 1-6*

The motif is sequenced at an upward third, then it is divided, sub-motifs 3 and 4 are sequenced at the second and the phrase ends with two sequences of motif 3, both at an upward second. The processing continues by reversing the direction of motifs 1 and 2 which in the succession of the 4 progressions reveal, like in a tuning, a play of quarts and quints (Figure 3).



Fig. 3. Dinu Lipatti – *Piano Sonatina, p. I, measures 7-10*

The construction is repeated in the next 8 measures, at „octava alta” this time, to put in resonance another pair of quints, to suddenly precipitate in a fall of perfect quarts followed by a series that repeats the succession small third-small second in a downward course and then the reversed one for the upward course. (Figure 4)



Fig. 4. Dinu Lipatti – *Piano Sonatina, p. I, measures 21-23*

This line, structured on diminished quarts or large thirds leads us to the first secondary theme which presents itself with ease within a musical period consisting of two phrases that begin in the same way but end in cadences differently. It is to be noted that the melodic of the theme highlights the balance of quints a-e, h-e and f sharp-h. (Figure 5)



Fig. 5. Dinu Lipatti – *Piano Sonatina, p. I, measures 24-31*

The second secondary theme juxtaposed to the first one, bearing the indication „cantabile”, keeps the play of perfect quintals like a germ. Measure 37 opens the line of processing that belongs to the development. We hear the main theme again, put in a dialogue relation with the secondary theme in short modulatory inflections reaching the tonal centers f, e flat, a flat. The second secondary theme is also sequenced in g minor, a minor, d minor, f major, b flat, the sequencing of its last sub-motif leading to the last section of the form, the round. The secondary theme is brought in the base tonal center, richly stimulated through ample arpeggios. (Figure 6)

Fig. 6. Dinu Lipatti – Piano Sonatina, p. I, measures 68-78

The line of the main idea appears at the end preceding the last declamation of the song in a sotto voce sonority. (Figure 7)

Fig. 7. Dinu Lipatti – Piano Sonatina, p. I, measures 83-84

3.2. Part II – *Andante espressivo*

The soft atmosphere of this part transpires from the first measures, giving birth to a page of extraordinary beauty which confirms that *Lipatti did not just play as he was but we say he composed as he was.*

The composer himself says that „last night, I played my sonatina to an inexperienced ear but a very attentive one, who told me the *Andante* was wonderful. I take this as a good experience and this proves me that simple and sincere things, concentrating all sensitivity in an uncomplicated and clearly organized framework, will always be accessible to the public „ (Tănăsescu, Bărgăuanu 1971, 85).

Part II is a tripartite lied A-B-A. The first musical idea, in b flat major, consists of two asymmetrical phrases. The melodic of the first phrase requires two important sub-motifs on the scheme of which the following enlargments of the second phrase will be built. (Figure 8)

Andante espressivo

The musical score is presented in three systems, each with a treble and bass staff. The first system (measures 1-3) features a treble staff with a melodic line starting at *mf* and *mn*, and a bass staff with chords and single notes marked *p*. The second system (measures 4-6) continues the melodic line in the treble staff, marked *mf* and *mn legato*, with a phrase marked *mp dolce* and *cresc.*. The bass staff continues with chords, marked *p*. The third system (measures 7-9) shows the melodic line in the treble staff marked *mf*, with a phrase marked *dim.* and *mp*. The bass staff continues with chords, marked *mp*.

Fig. 8. Dinu Lipatti – *Piano Sonatina, p. II, measures 1-11*

Section B begins on the tonic C deploying the constantly increased line of the initial melody. The same thematic elements provide a basis for this middle part. In addition, the rhythmic formula formed by the eighth with a point followed by a sixteenth emphasizes the longing character. (Figure 9)

Fig. 9. Dinu Lipatti – Piano Sonatina, p. II, measures 23-26

The last section presents the phrases in a reversed order, the second phrase that holds the same proportions of the first occurrence, is brought in e flat minor. The conclusion is made by the second phrase, in respirations that are enlarged by the mood which becomes increasingly extinct.

3.3. Part III – Allegro

The final Allegro brings the character of the rondo in a sonata form, a method frequently encountered in the classical structures of the sonata. The main theme articulates in two concise phrases the 4 dancing motifs, in a binary, alert rhythm. We notice the kinship of the main theme opening the Sonatina with this dance melody, using the same melodic pattern built on quarts and quints. (Figure 10 a. and 10 b.)



Fig. 10 a. *Dinu Lipatti – Piano Sonatina, p. I, measures 7-10*



Fig. 10 b. *Dinu Lipatti – Piano Sonatina, p. III, measures 1-2*

After a quick interlude, marked by asymmetrical stresses and by the impetuous rolling of the sixteenth durations, the dance is heard again, with slightly wider proportions by the short comments of the grave register outlining the motif ending formulas. (Figure 11)

Fig. 11. Dinu Lipatti – Piano Sonata, p. III, measures 19-32

The second theme appears from measure 36 in the dulcimer-like accompaniment of the bass. Among the sounds that respire slowly on long durations, two longing motifs appear, the first one consisting of the gradual pace of the small seconds and the second one of the upward quint pace resolved through opposite movement. (Figure 12)



Fig. 12. Dinu Lipatti – *Piano Sonatina*, p. III, measures 36-53

Measure 67 marks the beginning of the development in which the motifs of the two themes are in a fervent dialogue, intercalate, interrupt one another's discourse, allowing to be lead by the tumult of the triolet rhythm. From the swirling sound emerge like flashes short motifs but also larger phrases (Figure 13).



Fig. 13. Dinu Lipatti – *Piano Sonatina*, p. III, measures 91-117

From measure 123, the more and more alert sequencing announces the moment of the round that brings back the A tonal center through the main theme in a strong dynamics. After a brief intervention of a motif belonging to the secondary theme, the main theme is the one leading the discourse until the end.

4. Conclusions

Cella Delavrancea wrote about Lipatti that „his creative inspiration was cut short by illness and left behind him only few pages, but bearing the mark of a fine personality” (Delavrancea 1970, 239).

In our opinion, *Sonatina* for the left hand belongs to the category of great value works composed by a number of eminent pianists-composers, Lipatti demonstrating in this work a noble sensitivity accompanied by a profound knowledge of the compositional craft and expressive resources of the piano, used by the composer „as means of communication and expression” (Păsculescu-Florian 1989, 65).

Although its name is a diminutive (the term *sonatina* taken from Italian and then adopted in English and German as *sonatine*, defining a work that has the same

characteristics as the Sonata, but being reduced in size), we believe that this work is a true musical gem that joins the few peaks of this kind in the universal literature for piano which, from a musical-expressive point of view, clearly detach themselves from their counterparts, referring here to Mozart's masterpieces, to *Sonatine in C major* by Béla Bartók (1881-1945) and especially to *Sonatine in f flat minor* by Maurice Ravel (1875-1937).

„The piano writing highlights the instrument and interpreter's resources, having to solve special technical-expressive difficulties” (Tănăsescu, Bărgăuanu 1971, 172) , the pages of the work being impregnated by a brio and a charm that fully satisfy the taste of the virtuoso pianist, requiring some of the most elevated qualities if one wishes to approach and understand a bit of the genius musician's soul, Dinu Lipatti.

Bela Siki, (former student of Lipatti, American pianist and professor of Hungarian origin, born in Budapest and living in Seattle) considered „Sonatina for the left hand, a short but excellent piece that I played and recorded many times” (Bojin, 2017).

Fully understanding the overwhelming role of the left hand for those who aspire to perfection trying to get closer to the top of pianistic art, the work fully reflects the permanent concern of the pianist-composer for solving and giving expression to its technical means. This special attention given to the left hand by the one who overcomes the technical barriers becoming a master of the piano is related by the ones who knew him, with emotion and admiration: „the attention he gave to the left hand was characteristic” (Delavrancea 1982, 707); „...another focal point for him was the left hand ... The secret of these exceptional interpretations lay not so much in the artistry and virtuosity of passages of the right hand, but in strengthening the role of the left hand ... ”; „ Lipatti gave a lot of importance to developing the independence in terms of timbre and sonority of the fingers of the same hand in order to outline the various voices of polyphony ... ” (Grigorescu 2011, 103-104).

The first audition of the sonatine took place in Bucharest, on 27 February 1942, in the interpretation of Dinu Lipatti who will record this work on 2 March 1943. The unmatched recording found in the Radio Sound Archive that he left us as a legacy being „... a document of great value: composer and interpreter meet creating a true work of art” (Tănăsescu, Bărgăuanu 1971, 172).

The value and beauty of Lipatti's sonatina has appealed in time to more and more interpreters, a fact that led to the presence of this work in the recital repertoires and recordings of it. Among them, we mention:

- Luiza Borac, 2012, Avie AV2271
- Julien Libeer, 2016, EPR-Classic EPR 20
- Marco Vincenzi, 2000, CD Dynamic, 199818.50

Versions existing in Radio Romania Sound Archive:

- John Ogdon
- Oana Velcovici

- Gabriela Bașta (first part)
- Maria Fotino.

Sonatina for the left hand is a page of great value that beat time, being the “proof of a truly creative talent and deserves to stand next to the recordings that prolong the brilliance of the interpreter” (Păsculescu-Florian 1989, 99).

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